



JAPAN

A COUNTRY PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

GEOGRAPHY

Japan is a collection of more than 3,000 islands situated east of China, Korea, and Russia in the Pacific Ocean. Of those, only 440 are inhabited, with the four main islands being:

- Honshu, the largest and most populated island, on which Tokyo is located;
- Hokkaido to the north;
- Kyushu to the south;
- Shikoku, cradled between Kyushu and Hokkaido.

The combined size of all of the islands is 146,000 square miles—about the size of Montana.

Most of Japan is mountainous, while only 11 percent of the land is arable. The islands also contain many volcanoes, several of which

are still active. The most famous volcano is Mountain Fuji—Japan's highest point at 12,388 feet above sea level—which last erupted in 1707.

An average of four earthquakes of varying intensity occur in Japan each day.

The climate is generally temperate and warm, with humid summers and cool winters. The islands are subject to two rainy seasons—mid-June to early July, and September through October. Typhoons are common in late summer and early fall.

PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

Japan is one of the most densely populated nations of the world, with more than 800

people per square mile. In addition, most of its nearly 126 million citizens are concentrated in the narrow plains along its coasts. Population control efforts in the country have reduced the growth rate to about .2 percent.

Japan has an extremely homogenous population; more than 99 percent of its residents are ethnic Japanese. Koreans represent the largest minority ethnic group.

Japanese, one of the most difficult languages in the world, is the country's official language. Although it is spoken in several dialects, the Tokyo dialect is the standard used by schools, radio, and television, and is understood by almost all Japanese.

For Japanese, saying "yes" doesn't always signal agreement. It can mean, "Yes, I understand what you are saying." "No" is severe. So to maintain harmony, many Japanese will say, "Let me think about it" rather than "no."

Japanese is also spoken in different styles according to social situations: intimate for everyday use; polite for cultivated use; and honorific to show respect.

MAJOR CITY CENTERS

More than three-fourths of Japan's population lives in urban areas.

The capital city, Tokyo, is the country's largest city with a population of over 12 million.

Many other Japanese cities have populations over one million, including:

- Yokohama (3.5 million)
- Osaka (8.8)
- Nagoya (2.1)
- Sapporo (1.8)
- Kyoto (2.6)
- Kobe (1.5)
- Fukuoka (5)
- Kawasaki (1.2)

POLITICAL HISTORY

According to legend, Japan was founded around 600 B.C. by Emperor Jimmu, the first in a line of emperors that continues to the present. Earliest records of a unified Japan, however, date from around A.D. 400.

During the country's early years, Japan borrowed heavily from Chinese culture. One key introduction was that of Buddhism, which has had a lasting effect on Japan.

Military dictators, or "shoguns," ruled Japan from 1192 to 1867. The country's first contact with the Western world occurred around 1543, when Portuguese sailors were shipwrecked off

Kyushu. The ensuing decades brought European missionaries and traders to Japan.

Japan's leaders severed ties to the West in the early 1600s after the Tokugawa family began its 250-year rule.

During that time, Japan was closed to all missionaries and its ports were closed to trade until Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the U.S. sailed his warships into Tokyo Bay in 1854. Japan opened two ports to U.S. traders the next year.

The Tokugawa family was overthrown in 1867, and the emperor regained power. The following year, 16-year-old Emperor Meiji announced Japan's intent to become an industrial power.

As a result, Japan imported Western industrial ideas and methods. By the early 1900s, the country had become an industrial and military power.

After its defeat in World War II, Japan entered a new era. On May 3, 1947, it implemented a new constitution forbidding military aggression. The country also intensified its efforts toward becoming the industrial power it now is.

Today, Japan is governed by a constitutional monarchy. As a democratic society and world economic power, Japan and the U.S. share many similarities. Consequently, Japan is one of the U.S.'s most important partners, and the countries work together on many issues.

ECONOMY

Japan has one of the highest rates of economic growth in the world. In fact, the country is the second most technologically powerful economy in the world. Japan is also one of the world's largest trading nations.

In 1986, Japan's Supreme Court ruled that one's job must take precedence over private life.

Because of its limited resources, Japan is dependent on importing most of the natural resources needed to run its industrial complex, including nearly half of its food and almost all of its oil.

Japan's fishing and shipbuilding industries are among the largest in the world. Its sizeable fishing fleet nets rough-

ly 15 percent of the world's total catch.

The nation's major industrial products include motor vehicles, electronic equipment, machine tools, steel and nonferrous metals, ships, chemicals, textiles and processed foods.

After three decades of remarkable economic growth, Japan's economic growth slowed dramatically during the early 1990s and efforts to revive it have had little success. Japan's huge government debt and the aging of the population are two major long-term economic concerns.

EDUCATION

Japan's rigorous educational system is one of the secrets behind its tremendous industrial success. Free public schooling is provided through junior high school, and attendance is compulsory.

Nearly 90 percent of all Japanese students go on to attend and complete high school, for which they must pass an entrance exam.

Competition to get into colleges is fierce, and many students are turned down. Students

not accepted into premier colleges in Japan have the option of attending a “lesser” college (similar to U.S. junior colleges or technical schools), studying abroad, or waiting to take the entrance exam again the next year.

Japan is the fourth largest student-sending country to U.S. colleges and universities. During the 2002/03 academic year, 45,960 Japanese studied in the U.S.

Despite the difficulty of the language, Japan has one of the world’s highest literacy rates (99 percent).

CULTURE

Japanese typically feel a tremendous obligation and loyalty to the groups to which they belong, including family, their companies, clubs and organizations.

For example, many Japanese spend their entire lives with the same company. The value of hard work is also stressed, with workers characteristically devoting long hours to their jobs.

In Japan, the individual’s will is considered secondary to the good

of the group. Because of this, groups almost always operate by consensus, and even powerful individuals seldom make decisions without seeking input from others. The Japanese go to great lengths to avoid personal confrontation.

RULES OF ETIQUETTE

- Pointing, licking your chopsticks, and blowing your nose are all considered offensive.
- Public displays of affection are frowned upon.
- The depth of a bow is determined by the status of the person to whom you are bowing.
- Japanese require more personal space when talking face to face.
- When invited to a Japanese person’s home, bring a small gift.

The Japanese, while an extremely gracious people, value reserve and modesty in all relationships. Age and tradition are honored in

Japanese culture.

People in Japan enjoy a wide variety of recreational activities. Performance arts such as puppet theater (*bunraku*), drama, and music concerts are popular. Nature outings are another favorite form of leisure.

Baseball is the national pastime, although volleyball, tennis, skiing, basketball, and golf also claim many enthusiasts in Japan. Traditional sports such as *sumo* wrestling, judo, and karate continue to retain their popularity.

HOLIDAYS

Following are some of the national holidays celebrated in Japan:

- January 1—New Year’s Day is the highlight of the weeklong “festival of festivals,” which is observed in traditional dress with visits to shrines and family reunions.
- April 29—Formerly Emperor Hirohito’s Birthday. Also known as Green Day.
- May 3—Constitution Memorial Day observes the anniversary of the Japanese Constitution enacted in 1947.
- August 13-16—Bon Festival features

Buddhist ceremonies to honor one’s ancestors.

- September 15—Respect for the Aged Day.
- October 10—Health-Sports Day commemorates the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.
- November 23—Labor Day Thanksgiving features harvest celebrations.
- December 23—Emperor Akihito’s Birthday.

RELIGION

Many Japanese do not claim a personal religion, yet the country’s two traditional religions—Shintoism and Buddhism—have a profound influence on the culture.

Japanese adhere to a blend of these two religious philosophies in hopes of obtaining perfect peace and happiness. They also believe doing so will lead to a life of virtue and wisdom.

The Japanese view both religions as different paths to the same goal. Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines stand side by side in the country. Many Japanese will have births and weddings blessed in the Shinto tradition and be buried by a Buddhist

priest on temple grounds.

State Shinto, a government-imposed religion that combined patriotism with worship of the emperor, was abolished after World War II. The constitution now guarantees religious freedom. However, social and family pressures often restrict that freedom.

In addition, many Japanese also heed the philosophies of Confucianism. In fact, most reject the concept that one religion monopolizes the truth.

Shintoism (“the way of the gods”) has no fixed doctrinal theology or hierarchies. The religion claims that many gods, or “kami,” indwell mountains, rocks, trees, and other objects of nature. It also stresses reverence for ancestral spirits of the nation, clan, and family.

Since World War II, a large number of religious sects have arisen in Japan. The Unification Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Mormonism all claim significant followings.

The materialism that dominates Japanese cul-

CHRISTIANITY IN JAPAN

ture often squeezes out concern about spiritual matters. Only one in five Japanese claim a belief in God. That, coupled with the fact that Christianity is viewed as a “foreign” religion, has resulted in a Christian minority of only about one percent in Japan.

Christianity was introduced to Japan in the sixteenth century when Spanish and Portuguese missionaries established themselves on the islands. Within less than a century, 300,000 Japanese had converted to Catholicism.

In response, Japan’s rulers began a scourge in which thousands of Christians were killed, and Western missionaries were barred from entering the country.

Today, evangelical growth is slow. Even among professing Christians, church attendance in Japan is low.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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